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# “De quoi tu parles?”: A diachronic study of sociopragmatic interrogative variation in French films

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# “De quoi tu parles?”: A diachronic study of sociopragmatic interrogative variation in French films

## Abstract


The French interrogative system, which allows for variation among several distinct syntactic structures, constitutes a domain in which normative prescription and actual usage differ greatly (Elsig, 2009). Although many sociolinguistic studies have examined this variation (e.g., Ashby, 1977; Behnstedt, 1973; Coveney, 1989, 2002; Fox, 1989; Myers, 2007; Quillard, 2000), most can be characterized as synchronic. This study traces and contrasts the increased usage and decreased stigmatization of the nonstandard interrogative variants—*wh-* in situ and fronting—with the decline of prescriptive forms—inversion and *est-ce que*—in French films spanning the 1930s to present day. An analysis of the social variables of sex and social class in a corpus of 20 films reveals that (a) yes/no questions—as opposed to *wh-* interrogation—have not changed over time, showing an overwhelming and constant preference for rising vocal intonation; (b) different interrogatives pattern differently such that certain *wh-* words prefer certain *wh-* constructions; (c) post-1960, there is a robust increase in the rates of fronting and *wh-* in situ that directly opposes a sharp decline in inversion; (d) working class usage of nonstandard forms is shown to be relatively stable, whereas usage by middle- and high-class speakers has shown an increasing preference for nonstandard forms; finally (e) across decades, men use more nonstandard forms than women; post-1960, women’s and middle- and upper-class men’s usage of nonstandard forms appears to be on the rise.

# **“De quoi tu parles?”: A diachronic study of sociopragmatic interrogative variation in French films**

Kelly L. Farmer\*

## **1 Introduction**

The French interrogative system, which allows for variation among several distinct syntactic structures, constitutes a domain in which normative prescription and actual usage differ greatly (Elsig 2009). This variation can readily be observed in (a) the four basic ways to ask a question that is sentential in scope (Ashby 1977)—that is, a yes/no or total question—which includes subject-verb inversion, the interrogative marker *est-ce que*, declarative subject-verb word order marked with rising intonation, and the *-ti/-tu* postverbal particle (see the examples in [1] below, all meaning “Are you going to the beach?”); and (b) the five ways to ask a question that is aimed at the specific constituent in the sentence replaced by a *wh-* word (Elsig 2009)—that is, a *wh-* or partial question—which includes inversion, *est-ce que*, fronting, in situ, and various clefting strategies (see the examples in [2] below, all meaning “How are you going to the beach?”).

- |  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| (1) a. <i>Vas-tu à la plage?</i><br>Go-you-CL to the beach                                   | <b>Inversion</b>            |
| b. <i>Est-ce que tu vas à la plage?</i><br>Is-it-that-PRT you-CL go to the beach             | <b>Est-ce que</b>           |
| c. <i>Tu vas à la plage?</i><br>You-CL go to the beach                                       | <b>Rising intonation</b>    |
| d. <i>Tu vas-ti à la plage?</i><br>You-CL go-PRT to the beach                                | <b>Tu/-ti variant</b>       |
|             |                             |
| (2) a. <i>Comment vas-tu à la plage?</i><br>How go-you-CL to the beach                       | <b>Inversion</b>            |
| b. <i>Comment est-ce que tu vas à la plage?</i><br>How is-it-that-PRT you-CL go to the beach | <b>Est-ce que</b>           |
| c. <i>Comment tu vas à la plage?</i><br>How you-CL go to the beach                           | <b>Fronting</b>             |
| d. <i>Tu vas comment à la plage?</i><br>You-CL go how to the beach                           | <b>Wh- in situ</b>          |
| e. <i>Comment c'est que tu vas à la plage?</i><br>How it is that you-CL go to the beach      | <b>Clefting<sup>1</sup></b> |

Loosely simplified, this syntactic variation involves the relative order of the subject and verb, and specifically for partial questions movement—or nonmovement—of the *wh-* word.

Compounding the wide range of syntactic possibilities, these forms are associated with different levels of formality (i.e., very formal to very informal), carry different sociolinguistic labels (i.e., *très soignée*, *soutenue*, *familière*, *courant*, *vulgaire*, *populaire*,<sup>2</sup> etc.), and are also identified with certain socioeconomic classes (e.g., *populaire* in the sense of working class). Although sociolinguistic labels and/or stylistic evaluations of the yes/no and *wh-* interrogative

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<sup>1</sup>There are many different clefting variants. Due to space constraints, the example is only showcasing one.

<sup>2</sup>Please note that researchers have used the term *français populaire* to refer to a register, a variety, a style, or a socioeconomic class (depending on the researcher). Throughout the text (unless otherwise noted), the term refers to socioeconomic class.

variants have differed, generally speaking, the standard forms are considered to be inversion and *est-ce que*, whereas the nonstandard forms are fronting, *wh-* in situ, and clefting.

This high degree of variability thus makes the French interrogative system a domain of prolific investigation. However, most studies can be characterized as primarily synchronic in nature (e.g., Ashby 1977, Behnstedt 1973, Coveney 1989, 1995, 2002, 2007, Myers 2007, Quillard 2001, Söll 1982, Terry 1970), and today, there exists scant research on the diachronic evolution of the different syntactic forms. To reconstruct diachronic evolution, historical sociolinguists have often turned to the written language (e.g., novels, historical documents, plays, etc.) in cases where naturalistic and spontaneous oral data do not exist. Because, however, there is a large disconnect between the spoken and written language (particularly in the case of French), data from the written language, although useful, only paint a partial picture. Additionally, due to the relative paucity of analyzable oral data that exists pre-1970, the direct evidence—in the form of spoken data—needed to reconstruct the diachronic evolution of total and partial question formation is lacking. Thus, the task of reconstructing diachronic change can be particularly challenging.

As a potential solution to this problem, researchers have turned to popular media recordings, such as radio broadcasts (e.g., Bell 1982, 1991, Coupland 2001), television shows (e.g., Haarman 2001, Rey 2001, Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005), and films (e.g., Abecassis 2005, Bernet 1995, Elliott 2000). Although each avenue can provide a viable alternative to naturalistic and spontaneous oral data and boasts its own unique strength, films are particularly useful due to their length, the amount of data that they can provide, and the variety of characters and situations portrayed. Additionally, much can be gleaned from the film speech of actors and actresses. As carefully preserved and widely available artifacts of over 80 years of recorded speech, films provide the linguist with a legitimate corpus of study (Abecassis 2005, Elliott 2000) and thus make it possible to gauge (a) how the interrogative system has changed over time, and (b) how each interrogative structure is evaluated at different times.

An example of the variation that can be found in movies is provided in excerpts from *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962) in (3a) and *Prête-moi ta main* (2006) in (3b):

- (3) a. *Comment*      *vas-tu?*  
       How            go-you-CL  
       ‘How are you?’  
    b. *Comment*      *tu*      *vas?*  
       How            you-cl    go?  
       ‘How are you?’

The utterances in (3) differ syntactically in that (3a) uses inversion, the standard variant, whereas (3b) uses fronting, a nonstandard variant. Although these examples are separated by 44 years, there are many similarities that render them semantically and pragmatically comparable. First and foremost, they are both asking the same question—that is, they are inquiring about the emotional health and well-being of a friend. Both questions come from a female and are asked to a female. Both take place outdoors in casual settings. Both, crucially, make use of the informal, second-person singular (informal) pronoun *tu*. Yet, what explains the shift from the formal to informal variant?

This study seeks to answer the previous question and uses film in an attempt to determine whether usage of nonstandard forms of interrogation (i.e., fronting, in situ, etc.) has increased over time and has become gradually less stigmatized in Hexagonal French from the 1930s to present day. The study was guided by two principal research questions: First, are interrogatives in the film speech of actors and actresses standard, nonstandard, or variable? Second, do yes/no and *wh-* questions differ linguistically, socially, or diachronically? In the following sections, I report the results of a preliminary study of a corpus of 20 films.

## 2 Methodology: Film Selection and Coding

For the current study, 20 films were analyzed producing a total of 1,040 yes/no questions and 731 *wh*- questions. Because data from a pilot study showed that that thrillers, suspense, and police films are likely to contain more questions (due to their nature), they were given preference during the film selection process; otherwise, film category (e.g., comedy, drama) was not specifically controlled for.<sup>3</sup> To control for regional variation, all films took place in Paris (or the immediately surrounding region), and/or the principal characters were from Paris. Additionally, the films selected portrayed present day at the time of recording—in other words, no period pieces were used—such that it was as accurate and characteristic a representation of the time as possible.

Every question was recorded for (a) its type (i.e., total, partial, tag, *si*, one word) and (b) its subtype (for total questions: inversion, *est-ce que*, rising intonation; for partial questions: inversion,<sup>4</sup> *est-ce que*, fronting, in situ, clefted *français populaire* variants) along with the (c) speaker, (d) interlocutor, (e) their respective social class and sex, and (f) any notes pertaining to emotion, scene location, etc. that could affect analysis. Those questions in which variation was not possible were then excluded from the analysis. These included questions where the interrogative functioned as the subject (e.g., *Qui vous a demandé ça?* “Who asked you that?”; *Qu’est-ce qui s’est passé?* “What happened?”), questions that contained only a *wh*- word (e.g., *Quoi?* “What?”), questions that contained a tag (e.g., *hein, non, n’est-ce pas, tu vois*), and questions formed with *si* (e.g., *et si on allait à la plage?* “what if we went to the beach?”). Additionally, following Coveney (1989, 2002), included among the categorical tokens (and excluded from the quantitative analysis) are instances where yes/no questions are marked by rising intonation but are phrased with “negatively-biased negative questions” (Coveney 2002: p. 182), as shown in Example 4 (from *Un heureux événement*, Bezançon 2011), and requests for action that use the second-person pronoun (either singular or plural) with a present tense, nonmodal verb, as shown in Example 5 (also from *Un heureux événement*). Although exceptions may exist, for the most part these types of questions can only be asked with rising intonation (see Coveney 1989, 2002 for a more detailed discussion).

- (4) *Ça va pas faire mal après l’épisiotomie?*  
That go not do bad after the episiotomy?  
‘Won’t it hurt after the episiotomy?’

- (5) *Tu nous fait une petite place?*  
You us make a little spot  
‘Will you make some room for us?’

## 3 Data Analysis

Although each decade is represented, reporting on all the results is well beyond the scope and space constraints of the present article. Thus, to give both a broad picture of what the data are revealing as well as specific results, this section will look at data from the earliest (i.e., *La bête humaine* [1938]) and latest (i.e., *Un heureux événement* [2011]) films in the corpus and will then present general trends in all the data combined. More detailed results can be made available upon request to the author.

### 3.1 Specific Data: *La bête humaine* (1938)

In Jean Renoir’s *La bête humaine*, after exclusions, there were 64 yes/no questions and 36 *wh*- questions; please refer to Table 1, for a breakdown of the data for yes/no questions, and to Table

<sup>3</sup>Additionally, it is important to note that future studies may reveal that “a stereotyped or caricatured form of speech” (Elliott 2000: 30)—as specifically pertaining to question formation—can be found in certain film categories. However, preliminary data have shown no such difference.

<sup>4</sup>Pronominal, complex, and stylistic inversion were all noted separately.

2, for a breakdown of the data for *wh*- questions. As shown, even in the 1930s, intonation, which accounts for 78% of the total question data, is overwhelmingly the preferred pattern for yes/no questions; this is across both sex and social class.

Interrogative Construction	Number of Tokens ( <i>N</i> = 64)	Percentage of Data
Rising intonation	50	78%
<i>Est-ce que</i>	9	14%
Pronominal inversion	3	5%
Clefting	2	3%

Table 1: Number and percentage of yes/no question constructions after exclusions.

Regarding *wh*- questions, we see that a high percentage of questions use *est-ce que* (*n* = 25). However, upon further inspection, 22 of those 25 cases are tokens of *qu'est-ce que* (i.e., *que* “what” + *est-ce que*). Thus, it may be that *qu'est-ce que* is skewing the data towards higher rates of *est-ce que*. When these 22 tokens of *qu'est-ce que* are removed, this leaves 14 analyzable *wh*-questions. Although this number is too small for a detailed statistical analysis, we do see a slight preference for pronominal inversion.

Interrogative Construction	# of Tokens ( <i>N</i> = 36)	% of Data	# of Tokens ( <i>qu'est-ce que</i> removed, <i>N</i> = 14)	% of Data
Pronominal inversion	6	17%	6	42.9%
<i>Est-ce que</i>	25	69%	3	21.4%
Fronting	5	14%	5	35.7%
In situ	0	0%	0	0%
Clefting	0	0%	0	0%

Table 2: Number and percentage of *wh*- question constructions.

Because Table 2 reflects a conflation of social class, when we separate lower-class from upper-class speech, social class distinctions in the *wh*- question data are a bit more telling. For working class men there is only one attestation of inversion (out of six instances in the *wh*- data), whereas fronting is only attested in working class speech. Upper class men, in contradistinction, only use the standard structures of pronominal inversion and *est-ce que*. Figure 1 shows *wh*-interrogative structure in terms of social class.

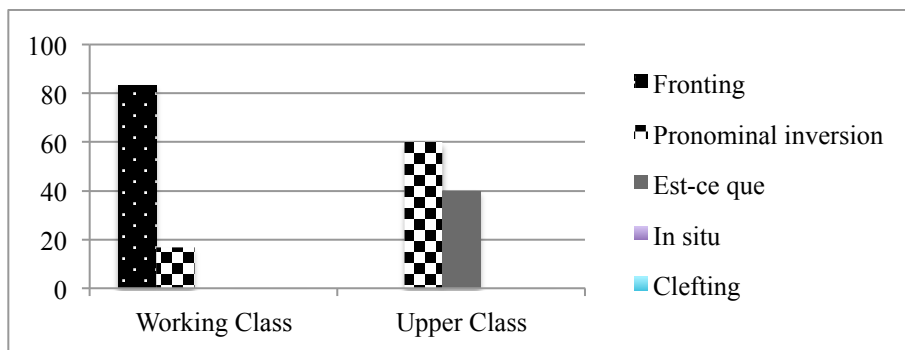


Figure 1: Percentage of *wh*- structure by social class.

### 3.2 Specific Data: *Un heureux événement* (2011)

Let us now turn to the latest film in the corpus, which is Rémy Bezançon's *Un heureux événement*. Of the 86 yes/no questions, 25 were excluded from analysis because they do not allow for variation. This leaves 61 analyzable yes/no questions, 2 of which use *est-ce que* (i.e., 3.3%); the other 59 involve intonation (i.e., 96.7%). It is interesting to note that (a) inversion is not attested in the data and that both cases of *est-ce que* were used by the leading female actress in formal situations. Table 3 shows a breakdown of the data for yes/no questions.

Interrogative Construction	Number of Tokens ( <i>N</i> = 61)	Percentage of Data
Rising intonation	59	96.7%
<i>Est-ce que</i>	2	3.3%
Pronominal inversion	0	0%

Table 3: Number and percentage of yes/no question constructions after exclusions.

Turning now to *wh*- questions, there were a total of 67 questions, and, as can be seen in Table 4, we once again observe that *est-ce que* is the preferred variant (*n* = 30; 44.7%). However, like *La bête humaine*, the vast majority of the instances of *est-ce que* are tokens of *qu'est-ce que* (i.e., 28 out of 30 or 93%). Because, once again, *qu'est-ce que* is skewing the data to reflect higher rates of *est-ce que*, when all tokens of *qu'est-ce que* are removed, a clearer picture of the data emerges in which fronting, the nonstandard form, is the most attested variant.

Interrogative Construction	# of Tokens ( <i>N</i> = 67)	%	# of Tokens ( <i>qu'est-ce que</i> removed, <i>N</i> = 39)	%
Pronominal inversion	1	1.5%	1	2.6%
<i>Est-ce que</i>	30	44.7%	2	5.1%
Fronting	17	25.4%	17	43.6%
In situ	8	11.9%	8	20.5%
Clefted in situ <sup>5</sup>	11	16.4%	11	28.2%

Table 4: Number and percentage of *wh*- question constructions.

Let us now turn to a comparison of yes/no questions across time. Figure 2 reports on usage patterns in 1938 versus 2011. When we compare the two films, we see that, although both overwhelmingly prefer the rising intonation variant, the more standard forms—that is, pronominal inversion and *est-ce que*—have slightly decreased from 1938 to 2011.

<sup>5</sup>Clefted in situ is a terminology that I use to refer to those variants that make use of a *c'est* subject cleft with a *wh*- interrogative left in situ (e.g., *C'est quoi le problème?* "What's the problem?" from *Prête-moi ta main*, Lartigau 2006). Notice, this example does not contain the characteristic supplemental *que* that marks the *français populaire* variants (e.g., *c'est où que vous travaillez?* *Où que vous travaillez?* *Où c'est que vous travaillez?*) Thus although the data are preliminary, these are not necessarily (syntactically, socially, pragmatically) the same types of clefting constructions and are analyzed separately.

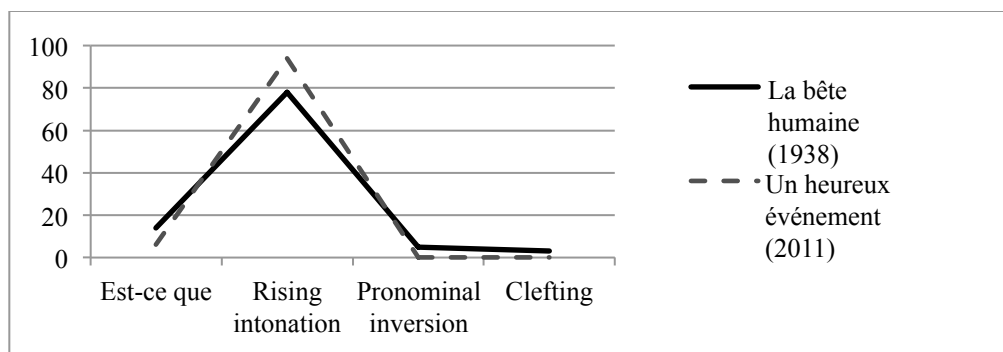


Figure 2: Difference in relative frequencies for yes/no questions between 1938 and 2011.

However, when we analyze the differences in relative frequencies for *wh*- questions (with tokens of *qu'est-ce que* removed), we observe a striking drop in the standard forms that contrasts with an increase in the nonstandard forms. Figure 3 highlights these changes.

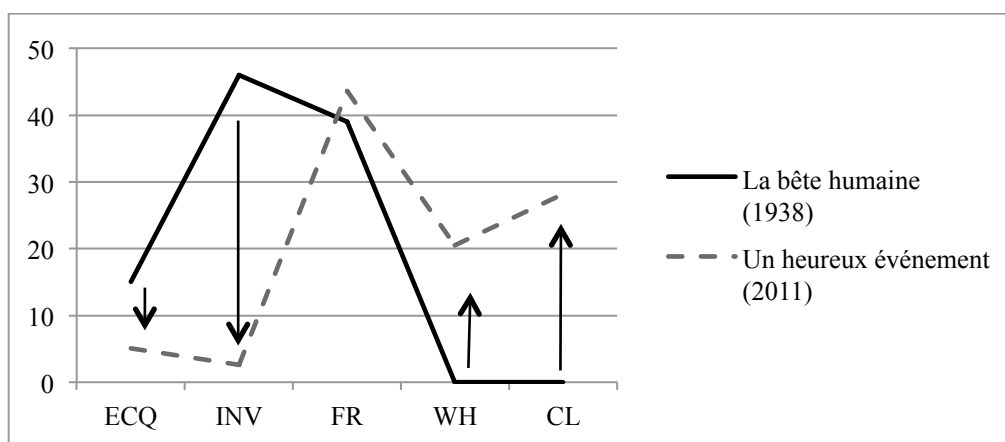


Figure 3: Difference in relative frequencies for *wh*- questions between 1938 and 2011.

### 3.3 General Trends

When the 20 films in the corpus are combined, data analysis reveals five general patterns. Regarding yes/no questions, two specific trends can be observed in their formation: (a) yes/no questions exhibit the most instances of categorical constraints—if a question is to be excluded due to lack of variation, it will most likely occur in this domain; (b) yes/no question formation has not changed over time: There is an overwhelming preference for intonation, among all social classes and both sexes. Figure 4 below reports on this trend for the 20 films in question and shows the relative frequency rates of yes/no questions in the film speech of actors and actresses from the 1930s to present day.



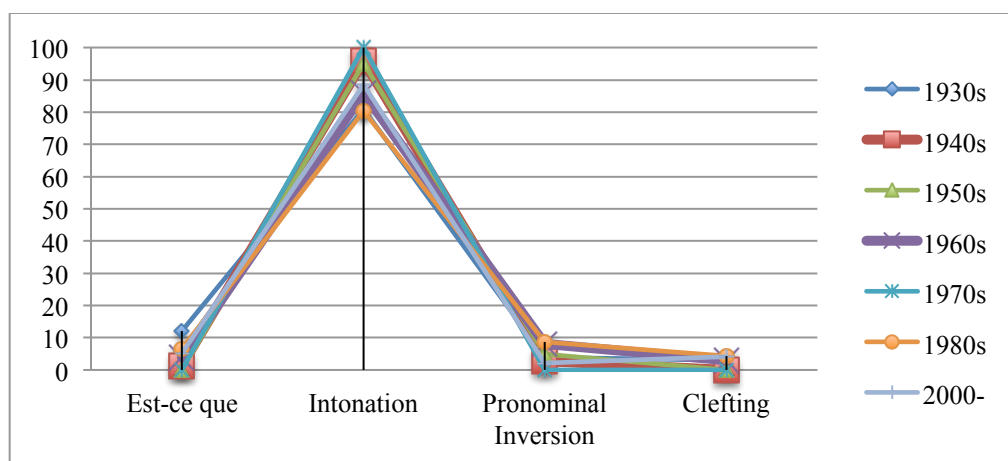


Figure 4: Relative frequency rates of yes/no questions from the 1930s-present day.

Regarding *wh*- questions, certain *wh*- words appear to favor (and in some cases prodigiously so) certain *wh*- constructions. For example, in later datasets *pourquoi* “why” is almost always found fronted, and *que* so often appears with *est-ce que*—in every social class, in every style, in every decade—that a strong argument can be made for lexicalization. Post-1960, there is a robust increase in the rates of nonstandard forms (i.e., fronting and *wh*- in situ) that directly opposes a sharp decline in inversion. Working class usage is shown to be relatively stable throughout time (i.e., their preference for nonstandard constructions usage has not changed) whereas middle- and high-class speakers show an increasing preference for nonstandard forms. Finally, across time, men have used more nonstandard forms than women, but post-1960, all women’s as well as middle- and upper-class men’s usage of nonstandard forms is on the rise. In this last section, we will explore some of these findings in greater detail.

To begin with findings on *que*, as previously stated, the interrogative word *que* so often occurs with *est-ce que* across speaker class and sex—in every style and in every decade—that it appears to be lexicalized. Because *que* can also occur with pronominal inversion (but must switch to the strong pronoun *quoi* if left in situ), let us look at the cases in which *que* occurs with inversion versus *est-ce que*, and conversely, cases in which *est-ce que* appears with *que* versus other *wh*- words. Figures 5 and 6, respectively, report these results.

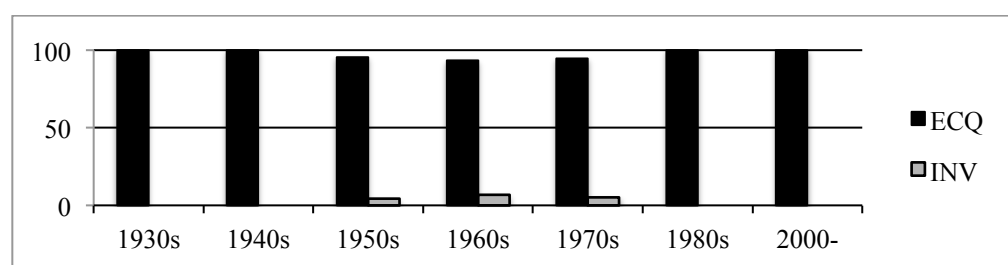


Figure 5: Relative frequency of rates of *que* + inversion versus *que* + *est-ce que* across time.

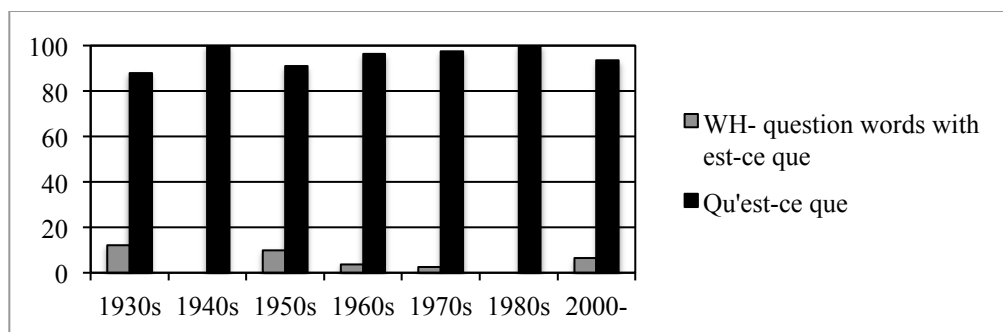


Figure 6: Relative frequency rates of *est-ce que* + *wh*- word versus *qu'est-ce que*.

Many previous studies have reported high rates of *est-ce que* in their *wh*- data (e.g., Ashby, 1977; Behnstedt, 1973; Coveney, 1989; *inter alia*). However, it may be that the rates of *est-ce que* have been skewed due to large attestations of *qu'est-ce que* (as the data in Figure 5 shows). Because the majority of studies do not give a breakdown by *wh*- word (cf., Söll, 1982)—that is, they do not indicate which *wh*- words appear in which interrogative constructions—this is speculative, at best. Data from films suggests that other *wh*- words simply do not appear with *est-ce que* (as the data in Figure 6 shows).

Let us now turn to the analysis of the *wh*- word, *pourquoi* “why.” Data from earlier films suggest that *pourquoi* is attested among the more formal variants of inversion and *est-ce que*. Post-1960, we see a sharp decrease of these standard-form attestations, while, at the same time, a steady increase in nonstandard-form attestations and particularly, a sharp increase in fronting. Please see Figure 7 for a breakdown of these results.

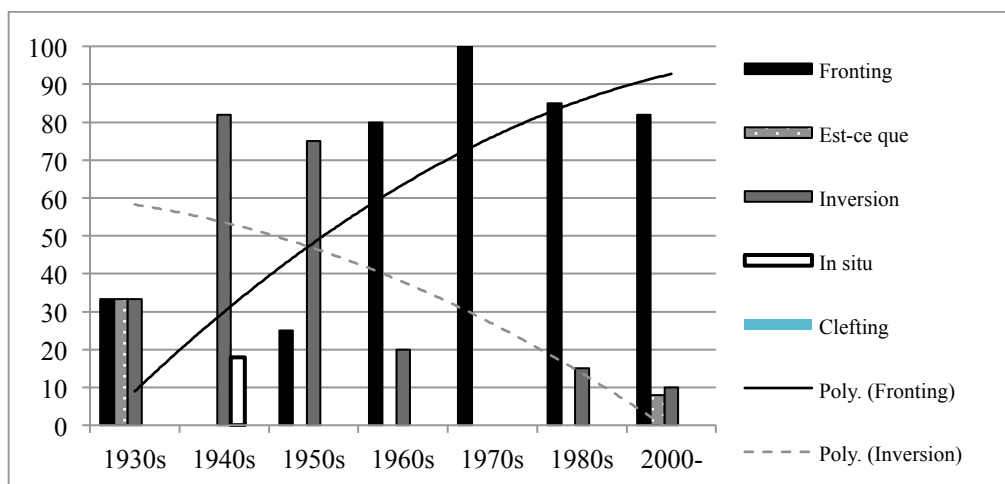


Figure 7: Relative frequency rates of *pourquoi* attestations.

When we turn to the analysis of the relative frequency rates of all *wh*- interrogative constructions, we see several interesting patterns emerge. First, because *qu'est-ce que* appears to be skewing the data towards higher rates of *est-ce que*, when it is removed, we see that *est-ce que* is rarely attested in later decades, if at all. Second, we see a sharp decrease in pronominal inversion. Third, and perhaps most notably, alongside this decrease in the standard forms, we see a steady increase in both fronting and *wh*- in situ. It is important to note, however, that the data in Figure 8 represents a diachronic “snapshot” of the general trend in that both sex and socioeconomic class have been conflated.

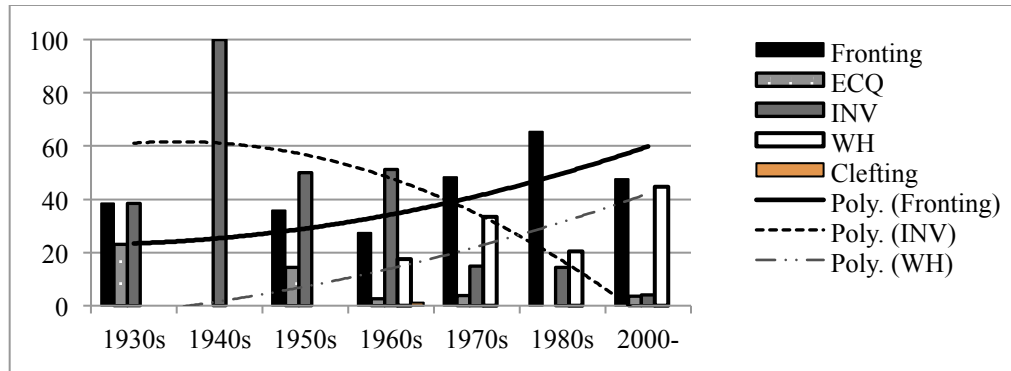


Figure 8: Relative frequency of rates for *wh*-interrogatives across time.

Our final discussion focuses on variation by speaker sex and socioeconomic class. Working class male speech is relatively stable across time and consistently shows the highest rates of nonstandard fronting. Upperclass male speech has shown increased variation throughout time: Whereas in 1938 only the standard forms are attested, by the 21st century nonstandard forms have not only appeared in male upperclass speech but also appear to be on the rise. Please see Figure 9 for a more detailed summary.

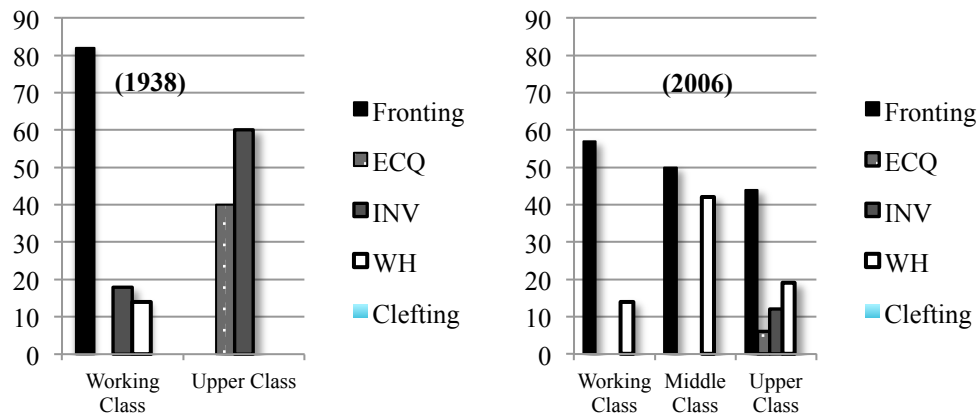


Figure 9: Relative frequency rates of *wh*-interrogatives in male speech in 1938 versus 2006.

#### 4 Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In answer to Research Question 1, which asked whether or not interrogatives in the film speech of actors and actresses were standard, nonstandard, or variable, data have shown that they are indeed variable. Although films are scripted, we do not see a preference for more standard forms, which we could reasonably expect due to an influence from the written language. In answer to Research Question 2, which asked if yes/no and *wh*-questions differed linguistically, socially, or diachronically, data have shown that only *wh*-questions differ linguistically, socially, and diachronically. In sum, we see that working class speech is relatively stable across time, whereas in upperclass speech, nonstandard forms appear to be on the rise in *wh*-questions. Additionally, data have shown that not all *wh*-words behave in the same manner (linguistically speaking): Certain *wh*-words appear to favor certain interrogative constructions and, in some cases, overwhelming so (e.g., *que*, *pourquoi*). In contrast, yes/no interrogatives appear to be relatively stable across speaker sex, socioeconomic class, and time as evidenced by the unchanging preference for rising intonation.

In conclusion, the data reported on above have shown that films can be a viable alternative to spontaneous speech and provide an interesting means with which to chart diachronic change in yes/no and *wh*- interrogatives in French. However, because data collection is ongoing, the results reported in this study are preliminary and merely descriptive in nature. Future research projects will explore the specific factors that influence yes/no and *wh*- interrogative usage and why.

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